

# SLY & ROBBIE

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# SLY & ROBBIE

## In Good Company

Sly Dunbar and Robbie Shakespeare have played hits, produced them and regularly reinvented reggae. For 30 years. *And they're still doing it.* Before our jam-packed disc even slides into your CD player, know this: it's the Cliff's Notes version of something that's *really* enormous. Their hands forged much of the last three decades' musical history in Jamaica, and worldwide.

The 16-year-old Lowell Dunbar, nicknamed "Sly" after his idol, Sly Stone, was brought in by keyboard player Ansel Collins to play on "Night Doctor" by the Upsetters and "Double Barrel," the historic 1971 U.K. No.1 and U.S. top 20 hit by Ansel and singer Dave Barker. Drumming and touring with Skin, Flesh and Bones, the house band of the nightclub Tit for Tat, Sly played a soul and disco-flavored style typified by Al Brown's cover of the Al Green tune "Here I Am (Come and Take Me)," a huge hit in Jamaica and the basis of UB40's later pop hit.



Bassman Robbie Shakespeare, meanwhile, had been mentored by Aston "Family Man" Barrett (who, with drummer brother Carlton, were the rhythm section for the Upsetters in the late '60s before joining The Wailers), and played in Bunny Lee's studio band, the Aggrovators, where he and Sly first recorded together. Robbie worked at Evil People, just a couple of doors away from Tit For Tat, and each of them enjoyed checking the other out during their breaks. "When this drummer starts recording," Robbie thought to himself, "all the other drummers will pack up." They regularly played 20 tracks a day for producers around Kingston in loosely-formed, sometimes identical lineups of sidemen, notably for Joe Gibbs as the Professionals, and in Word, Sound and Power, behind Peter Tosh. But it was in the Revolutionaries, for producers Joseph (Joe Joe) and Ernest Hookim, that they hit critical mass. Updating classic Studio One rhythms, Robbie's deep-swinging, authoritative bass lines and Sly's prolific, innovative drum work combined razor-edged, Motown-influenced high frequencies with a hard, militant feel reflecting the charged political atmosphere of the time. This sound, tagged "rockers," swept the sound systems. Many would say that in the country that makes more records than any other, Sly and Robbie have played on more records than anyone else. That's close to a million by now, Sly

guesses: if you want to check his math, figure 20 tunes a day for 25 years, and you get nearly 200,000 tracks, multiplied by remixes, dubs, versions and all those one-rhythm albums.

Yet, Sly and Robbie evince a continuing enthusiasm for their early inspirations as well as the everyday challenge of making a new hit. Says Dunbar: "What I really like about music is figuring what makes a song tick, and making a beat that will make it come alive. Searching for that groove keeps me going, going, going all the time." The duo's partnership, he adds, runs on "Love for each other, and a total respect. (We've tried) to shape the music. The way Motown had a different sound than Philadelphia or Stax or Brunswick, we worked on creating a sound for years and years, every day in the studio - always looking back at where we came from, and where can we go."

That combination of history, enthusiastic forward thinking and spontaneous innovation is the recurring theme of Sly and Robbie. The oldest track here, Tappa Zukie's "Dub MPLA" was recorded at the Hookims' Channel One studio, probably in 1972. As in many cases, it was an update of an update: its basis was Roy Richards' Studio One version of a minor 1970 Little Richard hit, "Freedom Blues." Tappa Zukie cut a vocal in 1976 to the track, then disappeared from this dub version remixed by



King Tubby apprentice engineer Prince Phillip Smart, later a leading figure of New York's hip-hop and dancehall fusion. Sly points out that the rimshot of the drum is playing exactly what the bass is playing; in a million different variations, it was this kind of intricate articulation of the rhythm made rockers sound fresh and irresistible.

Sly and Robbie tried almost immediately to start a label together, but it was 1978 before their Taxi Productions really launched: they spent a year saving tour and studio money to finance the first Taxi record, Black Uhuru's "Observe Life." Despite their track record, there was no rush toward them as producers, according to Sly: "We were just musicians trying to produce." But Gregory Isaacs cut six tracks with them using free time at Channel One, and his "Soon Forward" was the first Jamaican Number One produced by Sly and Robbie. The Taxi meter was finally running.

Sly and Robbie introduced new synthesizer and electronic drum sounds into reggae more aggressively than anyone else. Yet, Taxi's approach was not a specific sound as much as an attitude toward integrating new electronics and new influences in a way that was somehow surprising, slamming, subtle and balanced, all at once. Grounded in their own musicianship, their records were trendsetting, but not gimmicky. Dennis Brown's classic "Sitting and Watching" was started in a session for Ossie Hibbert, who didn't care for the

tune; sidemen Sly and Robbie put up their own tape and cut the track for themselves, with Robbie adding a guitar track patterned after a recent hit they'd arranged, Sheila Hylton's version of "Bed's Too Big Without You." "That's what I miss about a live session: with six musicians inside a studio, somebody finds a groove and everyone feeds from it."

Taxi's eclecticism bonded easily with other unique and progressive voices: Ini Kamoze's "Trouble You a Trouble Me" was the first song they cut together. "His vocals sound so innocent," says Sly, who absorbed the demo tape for a week in his car, becoming more and more fascinated. "At the studio I told Robbie: Don't play the cassette till we reach the room," so as to create a fresh impression of an unusual artist. And with Black Uhuru (Michael Rose, Duckie Simpson and Puma Jones) whose "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" was one of a string of Taxi hits, Sly and Robbie found a platform of their own. To represent the group - and reggae generally - in the strongest way, Sly and Robbie toured with them worldwide through 1981. Their incendiary playing and obsessive attention to bringing studio intensity to their live presentation made both Black Uhuru and Sly & Robbie bona fide stars of the concert stage. Not long afterwards, Tom Tom Club's "Genius of Love" called them out among such musical titans as James Brown, Bootsy Collins and Hamilton Bohannon. The line,

"Reggae's expanding with Sly and Robbie" zeroed right in on how influential they'd become, *and* the way they'd done it.

Island Records founder Chris Blackwell was critical in Sly and Robbie's emergence on the world stage: he distributed Taxi's records worldwide, signed them as a recording act, and teamed them with Island artists. Model-turned-disco singer Grace Jones was a surprising lynchpin, as her fourth Island album project (*Warm Leatherette*, 1980) occasioned the formation of the Compass Point All Stars at Island's studio in Nassau, Bahamas. To re-image Jones, Blackwell and co-producer Alex Sadkin gathered rock and new wave cover material, and convened an international rhythm section around Sly and Robbie to provide a setting of space-age reggae, hard rock, twisted disco and everything in between. The concept was so dead-on that even Chrissie Hynde, hearing a Jones re-cut of her own song in a German club, said to herself, excitedly, "Now, *that's* how it's supposed to sound!" It re-launched Jones as a serious interpreter, and it also fixed an imposing image of the Compass Point All Stars as the new (and, as it turns out, sadly, the last) incarnation of the studio-based house band, in the great tradition of Atlantic, Motown, Philadelphia International and Stax.

The evolution of Jones' biggest U.S. hit single, "Pull Up to the Bumper," typified the

creative process - the creative overflow, really - at Compass Point. The rhythm track was inspired by the Brothers Johnson's "I'll Be Good to You" - "the best-sounding record," says Sly, still enthused. Grace wrote a lyric, with unsatisfactory results. So, anticipating that the track would not make it onto the eventual lineup of *Nightclubbing*, a new lyric, "Spread yourself all over me / Like peanut butter," was written, and they tweaked up the track with some new syndrum lines similar to "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner," to add a reggae element. On the road, Sly and Robbie learned that Grace had taken a second run at finishing the song, "and it couldn't have been more perfect," as she put it to me shortly after its release. The instrumental eventually turned up as Compass Point All Stars' "Peanut Butter" on of the b-side a Junior Tucker 12-inch in the U.K., whose value zoomed after deletion when collectors realized that it was the work track of "Bumper." (This compilation is saving you \$350 right there, boy.) And the lyric of "Peanut Butter" finally surfaced in the club hit on Gwen Guthrie's second Island album - as well as several subsequent British and European house records sampling Guthrie's vocals.

By 1982, Compass Point was a magnet, and the workaholic pace had Robbie dreaming about a vacation of two or four hours, let alone two to four weeks. Bob Dylan, James Brown, Mick Jagger, Cyndi Lauper, Ian Dury were



among those who visited; even the French pop iconoclast Serge Gainsbourg ("Je T'Aime...Moi Non Plus") enlisted Sly and Robbie in a reggae version of the French national anthem, "La Marseillaise." International sessions were usually relaxed, since artists and producers arrived already fond of Sly and Robbie's style. The duo's encyclopedic ability, moreover, made the matchups seem easy, as in Joan Armatrading's tough blues/rock "I Can't Lie To Myself," which doesn't betray any hint of compromise. Joe Cocker's cover of the Brenda Russell song "So Good, So Right" was a particular pleasure: "We were enjoying ourselves so much recording that song; Joe would be playing his imaginary guitar, it would make us want to play more."

Even a waste of studio time was liable to turn into a Sly and Robbie hit: their cover of "Don't Stop the Music," as Bits and Pieces, had Robbie and Tyrone Downey on vocals and Sly as a DJ, and it was headed for the scrap heap when it was played back and picked for single release, mid-charting R&B in August 1981. That they'd cover Yarbrough and Peoples' huge hit so soon, pull it off in such a fresh way, and actually chart it, proved again that they could carry a Jamaican concept - immediate "versioning" - into the international arena. Another well-chosen cover was War's "River Niger" from the *Sly-Go-Ville* album, remade at the suggestion of horn arranger Clive Hunt.

Fallout from Bits and Pieces resulted in more influential music: New York-based Gwen Guthrie, already a star songwriter and backup singer, had impressed Sly and Robbie at a Peter Tosh session with her own fluent ability to merge styles, her keyboards and her vocals. After the U.S. success of Bits and Pieces, Gwen was called for leads in what was to be a Quincy Jones-style concept album. But on hearing the tracks, Chris Blackwell suggested it was really a Gwen Guthrie album. With her "Peek-a-Boo" bridging the electronics of "Don't Stop the Music" with the obvious influences of Chic, Gwen was the second artist to chart with a Sly and Robbie production, sealing a close friendship. Even when Guthrie became her own producer, Sly programmed the drums for her worldwide smash, "Ain't Nothin' Goin' On But the Rent." Their sparse, dubbish arrangements were signatures of the "Garage" movement of soulful dance music helmed by DJ Larry Levan. "Dat *my* singah," they would say of her, fondly. "Their" singer also figures audibly, and gorgeously, in Toots Hibbert's "Spiritual Healing," which gracefully references not only the lyrical motifs of Marvin Gaye's "Sexual Healing" but several melodic and lyrical elements of another of his classics, "Let's Get It On."

Sly and Robbie have never lost touch with the street, and their outside work for Gussie Clarke, Donovan Germain and Winston Riley,

among others, kept them in the forefront of a changing reggae. Prince Jammy's "Rub-a-Dub Version" is a remake of the classic "Stalag" rhythm, produced by a King Tubby engineer who would soon be crowned King as the most important producer on the island by the mid-'80s. "Stalag" was heard most famously in Tenor Saw's "Ring the Alarm" and many subsequent rap tributes through the '80s (Fu-Schnickens) to the present day (The Freestylers). The duo's playing on Half Pint's "Greetings," a George Phang production, directly heralded the dawn of the dancehall era, an even harder and tenser incarnation of reggae tailored for the rough atmosphere of the sound system and the pent-up personality of the raggamuffin: "Josey Wales told us we are the reason why people go to the dance and fire a gunshot!" says Sly. Josey was pacing back and forth in the studio, according to Sly, and his movements dictated Sly's tom-tom and clap playing on the track. With the early use of MIDI to trigger electronic drums with live playing, "when it came out, everyone thought it was a drum machine."

Sly and Robbie were not caught unaware when Wayne Smith's "Under Me Sleng Teng" became the champion rhythm of all time, based on nothing more than a pattern on a cheap Casio keyboard. "When drum programming came in and I saw the impact, I got involved

with it immediately," says Sly. I can get it down on the kit, or I can go to the drum machine, depending on the sound I want for the record. But it's faster to get it down on computer because now kids don't know how to mike the drum kit for recording."

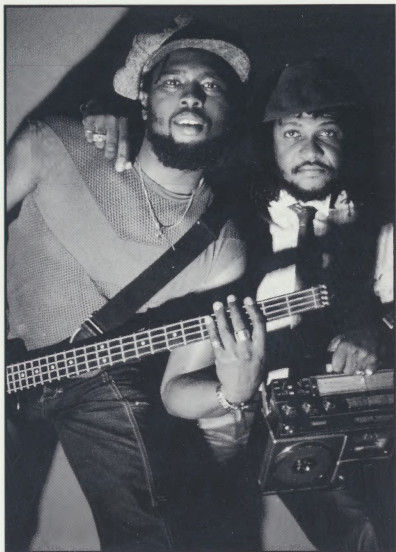
In the '90s, the inventive combination of far-flung influences has again served Sly and Robbie well. "Murder She Wrote" was a play on the "Bam Bam" rhythm by Byron Lee and the Maytals, but with a transforming twist in the sampled and programmed sound of an East Indian tabla. Intrigued by the Asian community's pop-club music "bhangra" while on a trip through London, Sly borrowed a drum from a friend in a Pocomania church, and added Carnival and traditional Maypole dance elements to make the track on a Christmas night. Within a week, Chaka Demus and Pliers had cut the first vocal version, and bhangra was on its way to becoming *the* rhythm of the '90s. Late in the decade, the same knack for surfing time and space resulted in the festive Sly and Robbie record featuring Ansel Collins, "Live It Up (Beardman Shuffle)," an old Skatalites tune that added big band, Latin, mambo and merengue elements. Beenie Man's vocal cut, "Foundation," was also a major hit in 1997, as was a similarly-conceived remake of the "Mission Impossible" theme. Sly and Robbie were sought out by



Fugees to remix "Fu-Gee-La"; and after being 1985 Grammy nominees for best R&B instrumental, they won the award for 1998 Best Reggae Recording for *Friends* (Elektra), an album packed full of A-list guests.

Quite possibly, it's their understanding that music mirrors the diversity and continuity of life that has accounted for the astounding fact that even after thirty years of playing, Sly and Robbie may well work up *next* year's ruling rhythm, or, for that matter, the next decade's. They may already have done so, considering the now-frequent sampling of their work by L.L.Cool J, Shyne, Playa and many others. "Reggae depends on how you feel," Robbie told me in 1981: "It can remind you of the devil and his army; it can remind you of a thousand angels." In 2000, they went out on tour with Black Uhuru again, coming full circle, and reconfirming what Robbie said at that time: "It's all so we can explore the inside, and put out what we feel on the inside." Every one of these tracks celebrates the old and the new in music, and the ability to enjoy them in unexpected new ways. Sly and Robbie, masters and adventurers, present here a living endorsement for the interconnectedness and eternal inspiration of music.

— Brian Chin



## 1. Half Pint - Greetings

(Trinity)

Produced by George Phang

Robbie Shakespeare & Andy from T.M.C. - guitars / Robbie Lyn - keyboards / Noel "Skully" Simms - percussion

Originally a Powerhouse single

From the Powerhouse album *Greetings from Half Pint* (1986)

## 2. Grace Jones - Pull Up To The Bumper [Party Version]

(Grace Jones - Dana Mano - Sly Dunbar - Robbie Shakespeare)

Produced by Chris Blackwell & Alex Sadkin / Remix by Steven Stanley

Rhythm by the Compass Point All Stars: Mikey Chung & Barry Reynolds - guitars / Wally Badarou - keyboards / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion

Originally Island U.K. 12" single WIP 6696, May 25, 1981

Also issued in the U.S. as an Island promotional 12" single PRO-936

Album version issued on the Island album *Nightclubbing* (1981)

## 3. Black Uhuru - Guess Who's Coming To Dinner

(Michael Rose)

Produced by Sly Dunder & Robbie Shakespeare for Taxi Productions

Rhythm by the Revolutionaries: Radcliffe "Dougie" Bryan & Robbie Shakespeare - guitars

Keith Sterling & Winston Wright - organ

Originally a D-Roy single

Extended version issued as b-side of "Sinsemilla," July 1980

From the D-Roy album *Showcase* (1979)

## 4. Gwen Guthrie - Peek-A-Boo

(Gwen Guthrie)

Produced by Sly Dunbar, Robbie Shakespeare & Steven Stanley

Rhythm by the Compass Point All Stars: Mikey Chung, Darryl Thompson & Monte Brown - guitar

Wally Badarou - keyboards / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion

Originally Island promotional 12" single DMD-381

Album version issued on the Island album *Gwen Guthrie* (1982)

### 5. Bits & Pieces - Don't Stop The Music

(Lonnie Simmons - Jonah Ellis - Alisa Peoples)

Produced by Sly Dunbar, Robbie Shakespeare, Tyrone Downey & Steven Stanley for Taxi Productions  
Rhythm by the Compass Point All Stars: Robbie Shakespeare & Tyrone Downey - vocals / Mikey Chung & Barry Reynolds - guitars / Wally Badarou - keyboards / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion  
Originally Mango 12" single MLPS-7789, 1981

### 6. Sly & Robbie featuring Ansel Collins - Live It Up [Beardman Shuffle]

(E. Freeman - C. Land)

Produced by Lowell "Sly" Dunbar O.D., Robbie Shakespeare O.D. & Lloyd "Gitsy" Willis for Taxi Productions  
Rhythm by Sly & Robbie and The Taxi Gang: Lloyd "Gitsy" Willis - guitar / Ansel Collins - piano / Neville Hinds & Robbie Lyn - keyboards / Ronald "Nambo" Robinson - trombone / Dean Fraser - saxophones  
Originally the b-side of Beenie Man & The Taxi Gang's Taxi single "Foundation"  
From the Taxi/Island Jamaica album *Mambo Taxi* (1997)

### 7. Joan Armatrading - I Can't Lie To Myself

(Joan Armatrading)

Produced by Steve Lillywhite

Joan Armatrading - vocals, acoustic guitar / Gary Sanford - guitars / Nick Plytas - organ  
From the A&M album *Walk Under Ladders* (1981)

### 8. Sly Dunbar - River Niger

(Papa Dee Allen - Harold Brown - B.B. Dickerson - Lonnie Jordan -

Charles Miller - Lee Oskar - Howard Scott - Jerry Goldstein)

Produced by Sly Dunbar & Robbie Shakespeare for Taxi Productions

Rhythm by the Taxi Gang, which included Radcliffe "Dougie" Bryan, Bertram "Ranchie" McLean, Mikey "Mao" Chung, Barry Reynolds - guitar / Robert Lyn, Keith Sterling, Robbie Shakespeare - piano / Ansel Collins - piano, organ / Wally Badarou - synthesizer / Franklyn "Bubbler" Waul - keyboards / David Madden, Chico Chin, Dean Fraser, Ronald "Nambo" Robinson - horns / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson, Sky Juice - percussion  
From the Taxi/Island album *Sly-Go-Ville* (1982)

### 9. Prince Jammy - Rub-A-Dub Version

(Winston Riley)

Produced by Lloyd "King Jammy" James  
Rhythm by Sly & Robbie and The Taxi Gang, which probably included Robbie Lyn - keyboards / Willie Lindo and/or Robbie Shakespeare - guitar / Noel "Skully" Simms - percussion  
From the Jammy's album *Stalag 17 Super Version Excursion* (1985)

### 10. Ini Kamoze - Trouble You A Trouble Me

(Ini Kamoze)

Produced by Sly Dunbar & Robbie Shakespeare for Taxi Productions  
Willie Lindo - guitar / Robbie Lyn - piano  
From the Island album *Ini Kamoze* (1984)

### 11. Gregory Isaacs - Soon Forward

(Gregory Isaacs)

Produced by Sly Dunbar & Robbie Shakespeare  
Other musicians on session probably Winston "Bo Peep" Bowen - guitar / Ansel Collins - organ / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson & Noel "Skully" Simms - percussion / Ronald "Nambo" Robinson - trombone / Felix "Deadly Headley" Bennett - saxophone / Bobby "Willow" Ellis - trumpet  
From the African Museum/Virgin album *Soon Forward* (1979)

### 12. Joe Cocker - So Good So Right

(Brenda Russell)

Produced by Chris Blackwell & Alex Sadkin  
Rhythm by the Compass Point All Stars: Mikey Chung & Barry Reynolds - guitars / Wally Badarou - keyboards / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion / Robert Palmer & Barry Reynolds - backing vocals  
From the Island album *Sheffield Steel* (1982)



### 13. Chaka Demus & Pliers - Murder She Wrote

(John Taylor - Everton Bonner - Lloyd Willis - Lowell "Sly" Dunbar)

Produced & Arranged by Sly Dunbar & Robbie Shakespeare for Taxi Productions

Associate Producer: Lloyd "Gitsy" Willis

Rhythm by The Taxi Gang: Lloyd "Gitsy" Willis - guitar / Robbie Lyn - keyboards

Originally a Taxi single, 1992

From the Mango album *All She Wrote* (1993)

### 14. Tappa Zukie - Dub MPLA

(David Sinclair)

Produced & Arranged by Tappa Zukie

Mixed by Prince Phillip Smart at King Tubby's Studio

Rhythm by The Musical Intimidators: Tony Chin & Eric "Bingy Bunny" Lamont - rhythm guitar / Earl

"Chinna" Smith - lead guitar / Ansel Collins - organ / Gladstone "Gladdy" Anderson - piano / Noel

"Skully" Simms & Sky Juice - percussion / Vin "Don D. Junior" Gordon - trombone / Bobby "Willow"

Ellis - trumpet / Felix "Deadly Headley" Bennett - saxophone

From the Stars album *Tappa Zukie in Dub* (1976)

### 15. Compass Point All Stars - Peanut Butter

(Sly Dunbar)

Produced by Chris Blackwell

Mikey Chung & Barry Reynolds - guitars / Wally Badarou - keyboards

Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion

Originally the b-side of Junior Tucker's "The Kick," Island U.K. 12" WIP-6675, Feb 16, 1981

### 16. Toots Hibbert - Spiritual Healing

(Frederick "Toots" Hibbert)

Produced by Chris Blackwell & Sly Dunbar

Rhythm by the Compass Point All Stars: Mickey Chung & Barry Reynolds - guitars / Wally Badarou &

Franklyn "Bubbler" Waul - keyboards

Originally Island U.K. 12" single IS129, July 25, 1983

Also issued in the U.S. as a promotional 12" single PRO-7809, 1983

Also issued on the Island album *Reggae Greats* (1984)

### 17. Dennis Brown - Sitting & Watching

(Dennis Brown)

Produced & Arranged by Sly Dunbar & Robbie Shakespeare for Taxi Productions

Rhythm by Sly & Robbie and The Taxi Gang, which featured Radcliffe "Dougie" Bryan,

Bertram "Ranchie" McLean, Willie Lindo & Robbie Shakespeare - guitar / Robert Lyn, Keith Sterling &

Robbie Shakespeare - keyboards / Uziah "Sticky" Thompson - percussion

From the Taxi album *Brown Sugar* (1981)





Lowell "Sly" Dunbar plays drums and/or syndrums, and Robbie Shakespeare plays bass on all tracks.

Compilation Produced by Dana G. Smart

Executive Producer: Pat Lawrence

Mastered by Erick Labson at Universal Mastering Studios West, No. Hollywood, CA

Tape Transfers by Kevin Reeves & Suha Gur at Universal Mastering Studios East

Production Coordination: Michele Horie

Licensing: Robin Schwartz

Art Direction: Ilene Weingard

Design: I Design Studio

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Thanks to Bruce Resnikoff, Maggie Agard, Chris Butler, Brian Chin, Jeffrey T. Clark, Jim Dobbe, Murray Elias, JoAnn Frederick, Richie Gallo, Jeff Glixman, Rickie Goodman, Laura Graven, Anthony Hayes, Jane Hitchin, Jeffrey Jarett, Quinton Johnson, Jason Kleve, Lisa Labo, Bill Levenson, David "Sourcemaster" Mucci, Ken Patrick, Lisa Reddick, Michael Rosenberg, Glen Sanatar, Rhonda Shields, Jerry Stine, Pupa Vlado, UMVD Sales, and a special thank you to Sly Dunbar, Robbie Shakespeare & Kaz Asonuma at Taxi Productions.

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